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LEGACY

Our Mission: Researching, preserving and promoting the Legacy of Florida Baptists

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LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people and events in Florida Baptist history. During 2022, the LEGACY's monthly issues will feature Florida Baptists' missions' commitment as reflected in the people and events that inspired their fellow Baptists in the fulfilment of the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to faithfully, "go and make disciples of all nations."

World War II Affected Florida Missions and Missionaries

As the 1940s began, Florida was still reeling from the effects of the Depression. However, the Sunshine State soon benefited – but not by choice – from the evolving World War II that grew out of two escalating regional wars: one in Europe led by Adolph Hitler; and a second conflict that was underway in China as the Japanese sought to expand the land of the “Rising Sun.” And before long – December 7, 1941 – the Japanese executed a surprise air-bombing attack upon the U.S. Pacific Naval Fleet docked at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and the United States was unceremoniously drawn into World War II. During the war years, half-way around the world, a Florida native and Southern Baptist missionary Rufus Gray was executed for his Christian faith.

The evolving war-driven opportunities, “produced dramatic economic, demographic and cultural shifts in Florida,” observed Florida Baptist Historian Mark Rathel. The economic stimulus generated an unprecedented development of 172 military installations across the Florida landscape at the height of the war effort. Profitable Federal government contracts for everything from housing to foodstuffs, “revived the state’s agricultural and manufacturing sectors,” including the state’s previously moribund ship-building industry, explained University of South Florida History Professor Gary Mormino. During the decade between 1940 and 1949 Florida’s population increased 46.1 percent compared to the 15 percent growth of the U. S. population. Florida Baptist churches also benefited from the influx of new residents as pastors and churches sought to address the evangelistic and mission opportunities they encountered.

WMU Societies Responded to the War Effort

Some churches, like First Baptist Church, Brandon, reported that their Woman’s Missionary Society “joined the war effort” by making Red Cross requested supplies. As did many other women’s groups, church W.M.U. societies prepared knitted stretch bandages for military medical units, and made socks, sweaters and fingerless gloves, among other garments, for military personnel stationed overseas.

State W.M.U. president Theo Thomas (Mrs. Robert) Lee, in her 1943 message to the Florida W.M.U. annual meeting expressed concerns about the women’s community service at the expense of their local church’s ministry. “We must not substitute canteen work for community missions; we must not substitute nurse’s classes for mission study classes; we must not substitute the study of war maps of this world for the blood-stained trail of human redemption taught us in the Bible; we must not substitute the giving of ten percent in the purchase of war bonds and stamps for bringing the tithe to the store house of God. Moreover, we must not lose ourselves in the doing of only humanitarian deeds. Our task is far more comprehensive than that; our task is ever to hold before the world the Kingdom of God.”

Florida Baptists' Own Missionary Rufus Gray



In the years leading up to the beginning of the war, Floridian **Rufus F. Gray (b. 1915; d. 1942)**, a native of Titusville, whose family had moved to Ft. Pierce, made a confession of faith in Jesus Christ at the First Baptist Church. Subsequently, at age 19, Gray felt God's call to foreign missions' service while attending a Florida Baptist Convention-sponsored Deland Baptist Assembly in 1934. Gray later attended and graduated from both Furman University and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. While in Louisville, Gray and his Furman sweetheart Marian Peeler, who had graduated from the Woman's Missionary Union Training School, married in 1939.

The Grays applied for appointment for missionary service in the Far East. And during the 1940 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, they were among a group of 17 young adults presented who recently had been commissioned to foreign missions' service.

The Grays left for China in September 1940, where they entered the language school at Peiping. They left Peiping for Shanghai on March 13, 1941, and went to Baguio, Philippines to continue their Chinese language study. Unfortunately, as Japanese military forces invaded the Philippines, the Grays were among a group of 175 missionaries (including eight Southern Baptists) and 225 civilians arrested and jailed by the Japanese on December 29, 1941. [A total of 88 Southern Baptist missionaries were detained by the Japanese during World War II and all but one – Rufus Gray – was eventually released.]

In mid-January, 1942, the Japanese military police began interrogating all missionary personnel. Based upon reports later filed with the U.S. Government and accounts by eyewitnesses, the Japanese suspected the School of Chinese [Language] Studies was being used to recruit spies for use in Japanese-occupied China. Additionally, the Japanese believed certain missionary personnel were spies for the United States.

Rufus Gray apparently had been targeted for special interrogation because of what were innocent, but incriminating, photographs that he made. An avid hobbyist-photographer, Gray had taken hundreds of pictures in China and the Philippines. It was later speculated that several of the Chinese individuals in the pictures may have been leaders in the anti-Japanese organization in Baguio. The Japanese had probably seized the pictures as evidence that Gray was an undercover agent for the United States. The Japanese military police reportedly aggressively interrogated and used waterboarding torture on Gray until he died without providing any incriminating information.

Florida native Rufus Gray holds the distinction of being the only Southern Baptist missionary who died during the war. The tragic death of the 27-year-old Titusville native, placed Gray on the honor roll of Christian martyrs who died defending their faith in and service to Jesus Christ.

A Decade of New Leaders

As reported in the March issue of this LEGACY newsletter, W.M.U. Executive Secretary Louise Smith resigned in November 1943 to marry David Fair Boyd. To ensure the ongoing continuity in W.M.U. work across the state, the W.M.U. Executive Committee assigned to **Elsie M. Renfroe (b. 1917; d. 2016)**, the W.M.U. young people's secretary, the additional task of guiding the organization until a permanent leader could be employed. The W.M.U. search committee at the end of 1943 had initially identified and sought unsuccessfully to enlist Josephine Jones of Illinois, to lead the Florida WMU. However, in God's time, nearly six months (May, 1944) later, the committee received a telegram from Jones stating, "I am convinced God wants me to go to Florida."

Josephine Proctor Jones (b. 1902; d. 1974), at age 42, came to Florida from Illinois where she briefly served as state W.M.U. Executive Secretary. She had devoted her life to missions education through the W.M.U. having previously served as WMU director of the Birmingham (AL) Baptist Association and the Kentucky Baptist WMU. A native of Danville, Kentucky, Jones graduated from Centre College and the Women's Missionary Union Training School.



Meanwhile, the decade of the 1940s presented the unique challenge to the State Board of Missions on three occasions to experience a change in its executive leadership. Earlier in 1941, the State Board of Missions had to undertake the search for a new executive secretary-treasurer, to replace **Charles M. Brittain (b. 1873; d. 1943)**. After more than 20-years' service to the Board, C. M. Brittain resigned on May 7, 1941. The 67-year-old executive cited a seven-year-old heart condition that was endangering his life and work. The State Board, in quick order, voted to employ Charles H. Bolton – who until 1939 had served as the pastor of First Baptist Church, West Palm Beach – then accepted a position with the SBC Relief and Annuity Board.

Serving from 1941 to 1944, **C. H. Bolton (b. 1886; d. 1973)** subsequently held the distinction of having served the shortest length of time – three years and 15 days – of any Florida Baptist fulltime executive secretary-treasurer. However, to his credit during Bolton's brief tenure, much of the State Board's attention and actions during the war years and following, revolved around providing financial assistance in the starting of new mission work, providing construction loans to churches, and granting pastoral salary assistance to mission church pastors. Those actions were significant inasmuch as Cooperative Program income was sluggish between the Depression years and the end of World War II.

However, Bolton's most significant achievement had a lasting impact upon the Florida mission program. After three years of negotiations, Bolton secure a 1944 working agreement with the SBC Home Mission Board in which the two entities would jointly foster a city missions' program within Florida. This program employed newly designated superintendents of city missions – who were to organize new churches and assist struggling congregations – initially in four target cities. These missionaries included H.M. Liechty assigned to Jacksonville, Clifford Walker assigned to Tampa, Theo Farr, Sr. assigned to Pensacola, and J.E. Johnstone assigned to Miami.

In 1944 Bolton resigned to accept a Florida pastorate, which set into motion the State Board's search and enlistment of a new executive secretary. Initially, Board Chairman and Pastor, First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, **Homer Lindsay, Sr. (b. 1903; d. 1981)** served as interim executive secretary. Subsequently, during the January, 1945, State Convention meeting, **John H. Maguire (b. 1900; d. 1987)** of Alabama was officially introduced as the new executive secretary-treasurer. His service and influence will be highlighted in next month's LEGACY.

Jones' Missions' Service

Josephine Jones, set the tone for what would be 23 years (1944 – 1967) effectively leading Florida W.M.U. In her first report to the organization, she said. "My prayer for myself and for all of us is that we may be faithful, for we know that if we plant and water God gives the increase."

To that end, one of the Union's first significant projects at the end of World War II was the World Relief and Rehabilitation Program adopted by the 1946 Southern Baptist Convention. The Florida Convention's solicitation allocation was \$150,850, of which the Florida Woman's Missionary Union was asked to raise \$50,000. Not surprising the women raised \$51,125 before the deadline. For several years Florida Baptist women continued to send money to similar relief efforts, providing food, clothing, and medicine to many who were the victims of the war.

Miss Jones' efforts to raise the mission consciousness and actions by Florida Baptist women resulted in the growth of the organization to 5,500 W.M.U. units by 1967, up from 1,534 groups that existed in 1945. The number of women and girls participating in W.M.U. groups doubled to over 80,000 members, up from 28,936 in 1945. She established a summer camp program for children involved in Girls in Actions and Royal Ambassadors, that continues to the present day. Additionally, Jones' mission commitment to reach with the gospel Seminole Indian and African-American children, resulted in the conducting of the first-ever summer camps for these underserved children.

In an effort to provide racial reconciliation – during a time of heightened racial tensions in the 1950s and 1960s – Josephine Jones started an inter-racial dialog with the presidents of the women's missions' organizations of the three African-American Baptist conventions that resulted in joint mission activities. The resulting Missions and Fellowship Conference continued to function well into the 1980s.

Brotherhood Undergoes Transition

J. Harrison Griffin (b. 1883; d. 1976), who served 20 years until 1938 as pastor, First Baptist Church, Winter Haven, was enlisted to lead the Brotherhood program between 1938 and 1945. The Brotherhood movement among Florida Baptist men enjoyed significant growth under his leadership. The number of Brotherhood organizations in churches nearly quintupled from about 50 in 1939 to around 240 in 1944. Although the war effort had depleted the availability of men in churches, enrollment by the end of the war had increased twenty-fold from 240 to 4,800 members.



Griffin worked diligently to enlist the men to become involved in the total life of their local churches and the denomination. During first half of the 1940's, the Brotherhood department gave special attention to the Hundred Thousand Club (to eliminate denominational agency debts), to the Million Dollar Campaign for Stetson, and to preparation for the evangelistic Centennial Crusade commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845.

The State Board responded to an offer from The Sunday School Board-SBC that proposed to pay one-third of the salary of a qualified music leader if the Florida Convention would establish a program of church music. In an effort to accept free money, and save Convention money by filling two program needs, the Board approved a hybrid staff position combining the two emphases. In 1945 **Clifford A. Holcomb (b.1908; d. 1999)** was elected secretary [director] of the newly-created combination Brotherhood-Music department. A native of Birmingham, Ala., Holcomb was a veteran of World War II, with previous experience as a director of music and education for churches in Louisiana and Texas. In addition to sponsoring layman's rallies and a State Brotherhood Convention, Holcomb began planning activities to stimulate better music programs in the churches.



This series on Florida Baptists' Missions' Commitment continues next month